Misunderstanding the Other: Colonial Fantasies in *Japanese Story*

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Sue Brooks's film *Japanese Story* (2003) constitutes an important contribution to Australian cinema's ongoing exploration of its cultural encounter with the other. Thematically—and even visually, with its reliance upon the outback landscape as background—the film appears canonical in its approach, reworking ideas and images that have haunted Australian filmmakers since Ralph Smart's *Bitter Springs* (1950). This tradition testifies to a fascinating and deep-rooted fear of otherness within mainstream Australian culture, even though the exact object of these anxieties—indigenous people, immigrants, global capitalists, to name but a few—has tended to shift in accordance with the pressing concerns of the historical moment. The revival of the Australian film industry in the early 1970s provided an insightful and rejuvenated medium for cultural commentary, coinciding as it did with both the flowering of postcolonial criticism and a shift in society away from the stultifying values of the Menzies era. The significance of Brooks's film should, therefore, be assessed from its status as a new voice in the ongoing cinematic dialogue regarding Australia's profound anxiety about its relation to the other (in its various forms).

Within Australian cinema's exploration of national identity, it is possible to identify several different categories of films dealing with the question of otherness. The first of these categories focuses on Australia's status as a colonized country, exemplifying the national type as an endearing mixture of inferiority and defiance who, in his (for historically such characters have almost inevitably been male) subversive role, wins the audience's affection as anti-hero and truth teller. The obvious example of this "larrikin" prototype is Bruce Beresford's *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (1972), the first subsidized film of the new era, whose eponymous character is a beer-swilling, straight-talking (in meaning, if not in idiom) womanizer who nonetheless exudes emotional vulnerability beneath his crass exterior. McKenzie embodies Australia's Oedipal relationship with Britain, the "Mother Country," an idea that would be explored more profoundly in such classics as Peter Weir's *Gallipoli* (1981) and Beresford's *Breaker Morant* (1980). Despite the loosening of colonial ties with Britain in recent decades, Australia's feelings of weakness on the world stage have not disappeared. Indeed, they seem to have been rechanneled into an implicit search for a new global "protector," the United States being the most obvious contender, a reliance that is celebrated in Peter Faiman's *Crocodile Dundee* (1986) and satirized in David Caesar's *Dirty Deeds* (2002). Australia's uncertainty about itself, its conviction that it is simultaneously vulnerable and worthy, has led to a strange ambivalence in which it will happily "lead" on the world stage, but only if it is following in the footsteps of a stronger entity.

A second identifiable category of film dealing with anxiety about the other focuses broadly on the legitimacy of the colonial enterprise in Australia. These films grapple with the complex demons of modernity as they face off against the forces of the natural world. This tradition includes the classic Australian "landscape" film, with its romantic images of the picturesque and the sublime. In her critical work *Playing in the Dark* (1992), Toni Morrison argues that the notable absence of African American characters in her country's literature signals a deep anxiety, turning this silence into a kind of testimony to the state of the national psyche. In the same way, the depiction of an implicitly vacant Australian landscape—*terra nullius*, to use the legal term—is not only about the potentially annihilating encounter between modern human and primitive nature, but also serves the imperialist vision of a land emptied of its indigenous inhabitants, who become simply "imagined" out of existence, unseen and unrepresented. A swag of recent films has attempted to redress this issue, including Nick Parsons's *Dead Heart* (1996) and Phillip Noyce's *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002).

The extent to which this fantasy of an empty land is referenced by *Japanese Story*, which borrows freely from both categories, can be seen in the film's opening scenes. The viewer witnesses Hiromitsu (played by Gotaro Tsunashima) driving in his rental car, music blaring from the stereo. The song he is listening to is "Treaty" by Yothu Yindi, a band from Arnhem Land that is comprised of indigenous and non-indigenous members who blend together ancient and modern styles in their songs. As a piece of music, "Treaty" has a symbolic resonance within Australian culture, both for the cosmopolitan approach of Yothu Yindi as a band, but also in its association with a key point in the history of *terra nullius*. "Treaty" emerged as a hit around the same time as the High Court's 1992 decision *Mabo versus Queensland*,

which acknowledged the right of native title to Australia's indigenous peoples. The Mabo case, as it has become known, was a landmark because it overturned the assumption of *terra nullius*, which had been used to legitimize Australia's initial colonization. Hiromitsu, however, is unaware of the broader significance of the music he is hearing and, finding it strange and unfamiliar to his ears, he jettisons Yothu Yindi in favor of some Japanese pop music. The meaning of this gesture is difficult to unravel—Is it a dismissal of the very notion of treaty as a maneuver of the weak? Is it a symbolic revocation of Japan's surrender in World War II, a continuation of war by other means? Or, is it an unconscious replication of the arrogance of an earlier wave of imperialists, who landed upon Australia's shores with a sense of manifest destiny? The coded ambivalence of Hiromitsu's actions set the tone for the film's general ambiguity.

As these early scenes unfold, the film gives the viewer further clues about the extent of Hiromitsu's ambitions. Even though he is treated with respect by the managers at the mine, for instance, the fawning supplication that greets him during his visit is motivated by the base need for the Japanese to continue investing capital into the company's ventures. Hiromitsu, the viewer learns, has come not in a business capacity, but for personal reasons, like a crowned prince touring the provinces he will one day inherit. What is interesting about these scenes is the extent to which the white, hegemonic culture of Australia, which the viewer is so used to encoding as the dominant paradigm, is portrayed as a submissive, colonial subject in the presence of a future master. Despite being released from its ties to Britain, *Japanese Story* reveals the extent to which Australian psychology continues to be dominated by its colonial origins—the "mother" may have been replaced, but the Oedipal dance continues on through a series of substitutes. Hiromitsu's sense of mastery is further exposed when he stands above the mine. "Like a Mayan temple!" he gasps when he sees the terraces. This exclamation has profoundly sinister overtones, referring as it does to the brutal Spanish conquest of the Yucatán Peninsula, positioning Hiromitsu as a kind of latter-day *conquistador*. At one point he even repeats the basic formula of *terra nullius*. "In Australia, you have a lot of space, no people," he observes. "In Japan, we have many people, no space."

For the film's mainstream audience, however, this repeated display of colonial arrogance and presumption by Hiromitsu seems, in large part, to have been obscured by prevailing moral expectations for a contemporary film dealing with cross-cultural issues. Felicity Collins, for instance, overlooks the way Hiromitsu echoes the actions and attitudes of his colonial predecessors, summarizing the first half of *Japanese Story* without any mention of the more sinister dimensions of this attitude:

> In the first act of *Japanese Story*, broadly recognizable national differences are mapped onto (slightly bent takes on) gender and sexuality, producing low-key comic moments. In the second act, the ironies of gender and tensions of sexuality are resolved. Cultural differences between Japan and Australia become a point of reciprocal exchange between Sandy and Hiromitsu, rather than sources of mutual misreading.

Because of his status as a Japanese man, in his position as an "other" within mainstream Australian culture, the arrogant imperialism of Hiromitsu—who symbolically discards indigenous reconciliation, treats the local people as implicit subordinates rather than colleagues, compares himself to a Spanish *conquistador*, and reaffirms the doctrine of *terra nullius*—is misrecognized by Collins (and, I would argue, by the vast majority of viewers and critics) as being merely the product of an ultimately harmless miscommunication between cultures.

This way of framing Hiromitu's character says a great deal about the ambivalent position of mainstream Australian culture in the world. On the one hand, the largely European makeup of Australia's population affords it an undeniable privilege in terms of both its cultural identification with some of the world's most powerful countries (such as its historical affiliations with Europe and the United States) and economics (the wealth of the Australian economy is disproportionate to its size thanks to these historical connections). When placed in the context of the developing world, the external resemblance of white Australians to their colonial predecessors, similarly, accords them a special status, as demonstrated in Peter Weir's *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982), in which a group of journalists in Indonesia during the twilight of the Sukarno regime treats the local population as their own personal fiefdom. By contrast, when Australians step into the world of their international superiors, this illusion of equality and shared status is quickly stripped away. Barry McKenzie, for instance, finds himself repeatedly exploited by various crooks and thugs who immediately detect his vulnerability as a foreigner, threatened with physical violence by two men on the street who sneeringly call him a "colonial," barely escapes being snared into a marriage by a family of perverted social climbers, and is ironically patronized on BBC television as part of a new wave of Australian artists and intellectuals. The "privilege" and "equality" accorded to Australia is thus, at least in part, a charade that has been repeatedly demythologized by its cinematic history. Its partners on the world stage, while engaging in a rhetoric of friendship, have at the same time never ceased to remind Australians that they are in reality disposable subordinates—from machine-gun fodder in World War I (*Gallipoli*), to legal scapegoats in the Boer War (*Breaker Morant*), to the soldiers in Vietnam forced to do work considered too dirty and traumatic for their American superiors, as a bitter Mick Taylor demonstrates during one particularly grisly scene in Greg McLean's *Wolf Creek* (2005).

The general reception of *Japanese Story* as an encounter between a "dominant" white Australian culture, represented by Sandy Edwards (Toni Collette), and a Japanese "other" in Hiromitsu, is greatly complicated by this history. There is no question that Australia is a country that was founded upon colonial assumptions, an imperialism that has led to the

oppression and attempted genocide of its indigenous peoples. But dominance is a relative matter, and the experience of mainstream Australian culture in the context of world affairs has hardly been a happy one. The myth of active masculinity that so permeates Australian national myths, a role that Sandy appropriates in *Japanese Story*, is, in large part, a reaction against Australia's very real passivity in the realm of global politics and perception. U. S. President George W. Bush dismissed claims in 2004 that Australia is effectively America's "deputy sheriff" in the Asian region, stating that they are in reality "equal partners" in the war on terror. Bush's comments continue a tradition of hollow rhetoric and serve as yet another entry in the uncertain dialogue between Australia and its international masters. At the domestic level, therefore, the hegemony of non-indigenous Australian culture must be distinguished from its anxiety on the world stage. The white Australian in reality merely "passes"—to borrow a phrase from Nella Larsen—as the simulacrum of a colonial power in the eyes of the world.

This perspective is further complicated by the fact that Hiromitsu is Japanese. Although the company men, as well as Sandy, are aware of Hiromitsu's background, this particularity seems to be lost or downplayed by the film's broader reception. While the story of Sandy and Hiromitsu may be read as a symbol of the struggles and misunderstandings that have marked Australia's general encounter with Asia, especially in the wake of former Prime Minister Paul Keating's attempts in the 1990s to shift ties away from Europe and the United States towards that region, such a reading commits the mistake of positing that one Asian culture is interchangeable with any other, allowing Hiromitsu, ironically, to pass as the "oppressed," generically Asian other. The vast majority of countries within Asia were colonized by European powers, but Japan is a major exception to that rule. Not only was Japan never colonized, but its national history is marked by a series of imperial ambitions and endeavors of its own, the occupation of Korea during the first half of the twentieth century and its role in the Axis during World War II being two notable examples.

Hiromitsu has no conception of himself as an object of domination and, on the contrary, initially treats many of the Australians he encounters as underlings whose primary task is to serve him. Seen from Hiromitsu's perspective, the journey he undertakes with Sandy becomes far more about *his* attempts to overcome the colonial attitude instilled by his culture. Thus, for example, he is exposed to the opinions of the unnamed man in the boat, who contemplates Australia's fear of the Japanese during and after World War II:

> In the war we thought you blokes were coming after us. We had stuff stashed up in the hills. Evacuation plans. People tying knives to the end of broomsticks. Ridiculous, really. Now you blokes own the place. Was a time there when no one'd buy anything made in Japan. [. . .] Only country to have a trading surplus with you lot. Funny thing, life, isn't it?

Excluding the colonial settlement of Australia by Britain, Japan is the only nation ever to have launched a military attack on Australian soil, when it bombed Darwin during World War II. Japan's defeat and subsequent rise as an economic superpower, the second-largest economy in the world after United States, has provided impetus for a further wave of paranoia, as expressed in the speech by the man in the boat, that Japan would attempt to conquer Australia economically in order to compensate for its military failure. The history of the Japanese–Australian relationship is therefore complicated and unique within the region. While modern Japan clearly has no interest in conquering Australia, either militarily or economically, such fears only reinforce the earlier claim that Australia merely "passes" for a dominant nation on the world stage, that its separation from Britain has not fundamentally changed its Oedipal reliance on more powerful nations, including Japan.

Since its colonization, Australia has been a country of immigrants, and the struggle to create a sense of nationhood out of this mixture of backgrounds has given birth to yet another category of films dealing with otherness. This third category attempts to address the gap between the white hegemony of its population, an ongoing legacy of British rule, and the increasing diversification that Australia has experienced in recent decades, with immigration from non-Anglophone Europe in the years immediately following World War II, and then globally in the forty years since the official repeal, in 1968, of the notorious White Australia Policy. Films in this category are generally underpinned by a liberal, multicultural message that urges the viewer to see past cultural differences and welcome the other as a rich addition to the fabric of Australian society. In Baz Luhrmann's *Strictly Ballroom* (1992), for example, Scott Hastings learns to supplement the originality of his dance moves with the passionate rhythms he has been taught by his new partner, Fran, the daughter of Spanish immigrants. John Ruane's adaptation of *Death in Brunswick* (1991) similarly jettisons the original novel's dark ending and provides Carl with an opportunity for spiritual redemption through his marriage to Sophie Papafogos, the daughter of Greek immigrants. Both films promote the idea that, while cultural differences may initially appear frightening and strange, they also add a flavor to everyday life that ought to be savored. The other is not to be feared, these films reiterate, but should instead be loved and accepted.

While the general humanism of such an approach seems difficult to fault, there is nonetheless something implicitly patronizing about this way of looking at different cultures, constructing them as a misunderstood class whose troubles are rooted simplistically in a lack of love and sympathy from the outside community. In terms of this final trope, *Japanese Story* presents the viewer with a complex reworking of this logic of cultural encounter. The film plays masterfully with the first two categories I have identified—Sandy displays a familiar mixture of vulnerability and brashness that numerous Australian heroes before her have embodied on the silver

screen, enshrined in her affirmation that she is "not a bloody geisha." This posture of independence is tempered, on the one hand, by the awkward social situation in which she finds herself while trying to sell her company's software to Hiromitsu, and her well-founded fear of the desert's treacherousness on the other. Her increasing intimacy with Hiromitsu follows the recognizable formula of films about intercultural reconciliation, although his death obviously intensifies and complicates matters. A crucial difficulty in interpreting *Japanese Story*, however, lies in the difficult task of determining the extent to which Sandy and Hiromitsu's friendship is meant to be read as an allegory of Japanese–Australian relations, or whether it is simply the story of two human beings who are brought together by the accidental nature of circumstances. If we choose to avoid seeing the central characters of *Japanese Story* as symbols of their respective cultures, then we are also forced to abandon the wider political implications that the film carries, a move that seems impossible from the perspective of critical honesty.[1] Far more explicitly than its most obvious predecessors, Clara Law's *The Goddess of 1967* (2000) and Craig Lahiff's *Heaven's Burning* (1997), both recent road movies that feature a Japanese–Australian pairing, *Japanese Story* constructs itself as an allegory about the relationship between these two countries.

Understanding the intricate power relations that inform the interactions of Sandy and Hiromitsu is therefore crucial to unraveling the meaning of the film. Sandy occupies the ambivalent space of belonging to a culture that is dominant at home but forced into a position of subordination when it comes to international matters. Hiromitsu is the bearer of imperial desires, heir as he is to his family's significant fortune. He is exposed increasingly to a mode of ambivalence that arises from his positive emotional engagement with his new surroundings, a metamorphosis that allows him to give up, willingly, his ingrained sense of aloofness. The attraction between Sandy and Hiromitsu, therefore, seems to be less about love or passion than a mutual shift in their initial balance of power. As Hiromitsu sheds his arrogance, Sandy lets go of her resentment at her inferior situation, and this convergence permits them to gain a temporary sense of equality.

While such a move of reconciliation is pleasing at the interpersonal level, its symbolic implications are rather more sinister. Like Hiromitsu's coded gesture of discarding the Yothu Yindi disc, his unfolding relationship with Sandy has a potentially darker political meaning when examined more closely. At the film's subtextual level, in which Sandy represents Australia and Hiromitsu the modern spirit of imperialism, the affair presents the startling idea that Australia, as a colonial entity, is not simply a passive victim of circumstances. On the contrary, Australia is shown here as an active collaborator, taking a perverse pleasure in the process of its own seduction and subordination. The allegory takes an even stranger turn during the film's sex scene, in which Sandy strips naked and puts on Hiromitsu's pants, after which the two of them make love through the open zipper. This moment is overcoded with images of inverted traditional gender roles, from the sex act in which Sandy is on top while Hiromitsu lies passively beneath, to the fact that she makes her sense of domination explicit by wearing his pants. The sex scene extends the film's subtextual thesis—not only is Australia a collaborator in its own imperial subordination, but lurking beneath its passivity is a colonial ambition of its own. In this allegory, Sandy wearing the pants as she rides the imperial "wave" symbolizes a perverse fantasy that Australia will gain power from its current masters through the kind of twisted, Oedipal love that an incestuous parent-figure bestows on a favorite child.

The story's third and final act, however, provides a startling break from this twisted fantasy. Hiromitsu's sudden death has the effect of lifting the film's allegorical focus on the intercultural, delivering the viewer with a jolt back into the particularity of Sandy's reality, as the limp and incommunicative corpse that Sandy drags out of the water and into the car brutally suspends Hiromitsu's identity. The fumbling attempts of the main characters to find a common ground in the first two acts pale in significance next to Sandy's encounter with Hiromitsu's dead body, with which all possibility of communion disappears. The incident plunges Sandy into an existential crisis in which she realizes that the uneasy rapprochement between different cultures reflects, on a collective scale, the impossibility of a fully shared understanding between individual people. Thus, in the third act, Sandy feels forcefully alienated from the people who are closest to her, as evidenced by her negative responses to the protective actions of her coworkers and her mother's ruminations on Hiromitsu's death. No one could be closer to her, culturally and biologically, than Sandy's mother, yet when the latter expresses the desire to send a card to Hiromitsu's wife, Sandy replies vehemently: "You can't send a condolence card to a complete stranger. You don't know her. You don't know her culture. You don't know anything about her, or her marriage—nothing!" Sandy angrily rejects her mother's rejoinder that "some things are the same the world over," the encounter with Hiromitsu having taught Sandy to mistrust the assumption of a universal and shared human experience.

Sandy's new outlook does not, however, cause her character to lapse into the silent despair of isolation. Just because perfect communication is impossible does not eliminate human exchange, but instead reconfigures its ethical parameters. The barriers that exist between human worlds must instead be acknowledged in a way that excludes any claim to full understanding. *Japanese Story* thus revises the flawed logic of so many films about the other, showing that any claim to understand the moral reality of the other, no matter how benevolent one's intentions, conceals an act of appropriation, a will to power that carries the lingering seeds of colonial domination. Sandy is given a chance to redeem herself in the film's closing scenes, when Hiromitsu's wife arrives to escort his body home. Yukiko Tachibana's cold conventionality is designed to alienate her from the sympathy of the viewer, to rob her of the warmth of familiarity by transforming her into an impersonal emblem of Japanese culture, just like her

husband before her. Sandy, however, breaks this impression by her actions at the airport gate when she intones, in broken Japanese, her admiration for Hiromitsu and his wife, followed by a flood of barely coherent apologies in English. Responding to this gesture of sincerity, Yukiko presents Sandy with photos and the note from her dead husband. The exchange enacts *Japanese Story*'s revised model for human exchange, one that acknowledges the limits of sympathy: Sandy will never comprehend what the death of Hiromitsu means for Yukiko, just as Yukiko can never grasp the happiness that her husband experienced during his time with Sandy. The essence of respect, the film concludes, comes neither from fearing nor understanding the other as a general symbol of their culture, but instead from conceding the extent to which we can never fully know another human being in all their complex particularity. ❑

NOTE

1 To make a parallel, would it really be possible to divorce Walter Lang's classic *The King and I* (1956) from its barely veiled political overtones? Certainly the Thai government doesn't think so—the film is still banned in that country for its insulting portrayal of the Thai royal family.

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